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ABSTRACT

Although the Community Relations Service gets involved in all kinds of disputes arising from discriminatory acts, most of its time is spent responding to difficulties associated with the police, the prisons, employment, and education. Its largest single effort to help resolve school desegregation-related problems took place in a six-month period between August 1970 and February 1971. During that brief period, the service assigned 47 professionals to help school officials in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Texas to move from dual to unitary school systems. This program included: conducting activities that would promote the easing of community tensions; helping to create and promote programs and activities dealing positively with problems incidental to desegregation; and functioning as liaison between all Federal agencies and offices with litigative responsibilities regarding desegregation and the involved school districts. Based on this experience with desegregation, if Boston is a tip-off of what is likely to happen in other northern school systems, then there is nothing in the South that is going to match that. Like it or not, come September many northern school systems are going to be desegregated. It would therefore behoove them to get on with the job which lies ahead. (Author/JM)

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REMARKS BY

Ben Holman, Director
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U.S. Department of Justice

To Participants Of The

Butler Street
Hungry Club Forum

Downtown YMCA
Atlanta, Georgia

March 19, 1975
12 Noon

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When leaders of the Wounded Knee uprising decided in May of 1973 to lay down their arms and surrender, they stipulated they would do so only to representatives of the Community Relations Service -- or CRS -- of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The leaders did this because throughout their long, unfortunate siege, CRS was the only Federal agency permitted access to their encampment. Our staff laid the groundwork for settlement of this case between the Justice Department and the Indians. And in spite of some loss of life, CRS was credited by Indians and by government officials all the way up to the White House as being a major factor in preventing Wounded Knee from becoming an even more bloody episode in this Nation's history.

When Omaha, Nebraska, city officials decided they were going to engage in massive urban renewal of their city and were concerned about reports that members of the Chicano, Indian, and Black communities were going to shut down the project, they, through some of their elected representatives in Congress, called upon CRS to negotiate a pact between a coalition of minority groups and local business leaders.

The project is now rapidly progressing; to this date there have not been any difficulties.

Residents of Lincoln Park, a predominantly black subdivision of Clarksville, Indiana, who had tried for nine years to get running water, gas lines, sewers, and other governmental services, will be getting them shortly under an agreement CRS staff members recently negotiated.

The Cityview section of Lorain, Ohio, will receive similar services under another CRS-mediated agreement. They too had been trying since 1969 to obtain such services.

Immediately after the shooting in Chicago several years ago involving the police and the Black Panther Party, I met with the Attorney General to apprise him of our reports indicating that that kind of incident was on the verge of being repeated in many other cities across this country. Subsequently, we met quietly with Black Panther members, some of whom were in jail, and negotiated a truce to assure that the episode in Chicago would not be repeated in other cities.

When Black and Spanish-surnamed students at Ramapo College, Mahwah, New Jersey, seized the Student Life Building in protest over alleged racially discriminatory practices in awarding financial assistance and other aspects of college operation, CRS conducted formal negotiations leading to an 18-point agreement.

Among the provisions were stipulations that the College increase its financial aid to students, establish a tutoring program, and award work-study jobs on the basis of greatest need.

Living and working conditions of inmates at the State Reformatory for Men at St. Cloud, Minnesota, have been improved as the result of an agreement reached when CRS brought together reformatory administrators and prisoner representatives.

Prisoners now have more say in how they can spend their hard-earned money. Their mail is no longer censored. They now have freer access to their attorneys, and the attorneys to their clients' medical files; and the prisoners can observe ethnic holidays.

Peoria, Illinois, and Lorain, Ohio, must hire minorities to reach 15 and 22 percent of the work force within two and three years, respectively, under two other CRS-mediated agreements.

I mention these examples to give you an idea of the breadth of our activities. Although we get involved in all kinds of disputes arising from discriminatory acts, most of our time is spent responding to difficulties associated with the police, the prisons, employment, and education.

In education, the problems range from student rights, to community control of schools, to significant participation in school decision-making, to equal opportunity for quality education, and, of course, to public school desegregation. And because there is so much concern about public school desegregation, I'd like to address myself to that issue now.

First, let me point out that our work in school desegregation is rather extensive. Our records show, for instance, that in 1965, just one year after CRS was created by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, we responded to 77 requests for assistance in resolving problems associated with school desegregation. Of this number, 52 came from the South, 12 from border states, seven from the Northeast, and one from the West.

However, our largest single effort to help resolve school desegregation-related problems took place in a six-month period between August, 1970 and February, 1971.

During that brief period, we assigned 47 professionals to help school officials in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Texas to move from dual to unitary school systems.

This program included:

-- Conducting activities that would promote the easing of community tensions and avoid violence which might arise from desegregation;

-- Helping to create and promote programs and activities dealing positively with problems incidental to desegregation -- thus enhancing the chances for peaceful and orderly desegregation; and,

-- Functioning as liaison between all Federal agencies and offices with litigative responsibilities regarding desegregation and the involved school districts.

When that effort was completed after six months, we had assisted 492 school districts in 409 counties.

So it is with this background that I speak to you today.

Several months ago I said publicly that some northern school systems were dragging their feet, or at least not making adequate plans for desegregation. I said that despite all their rhetoric, some southern communities realized that public school desegregation was inevitable, and, although reluctantly, proceeded to develop school desegregation plans.

I received some criticism for my statements, some of which went so far as to say that I was suggesting that everything was hunky dory with the South. I was saying something quite to the contrary.

What I was saying is that based on our experience with desegregation in both the North and the South, if Boston is a tip-off of what is likely to happen in other northern school systems, then there is nothing in the South that is going to match that.

Interestingly enough, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission last week released a report assessing the progress of equal educational opportunity since the Brown decision, in which it makes the point that not much is being done about desegregating northern schools.

Among the findings in that report, Twenty Years After Brown, are these:

-- School desegregation progress in the North has been minimal. The proportion of black pupils attending predominantly white schools had increased less than 1 percent between 1968 and 1972. In 1972 more than 71 percent of black pupils continued to attend predominantly minority schools.

-- Most fears about school desegregation have proved groundless, and desegregation generally is working where it has been genuinely attempted. Given adequate preparation, planning, and leadership, desegregation can and has been a force contributing to substantial improvement in the quality of education, including among other factors, the opening of new opportunities to know and understand persons of differing backgrounds.

-- "Freedom of choice" has proved a totally ineffective method of school desegregation. It has received support in North and South as a political compromise between the constitutional imperative to eliminate segregation and the resistance of many white Americans to the changes in the educational system this requires. It is a compromise that leads to only one result: denial of equal educational opportunity.

Now I have no illusions about southern school desegregation problems.

I am aware of and quite concerned about the disproportionate suspension and push-out rates of black students.

I am aware of and quite concerned about the downgrading of black principals.

I am also aware of and quite concerned that many school systems have chosen the most roundabout and complex processes and approaches regarding placement and utilization of black children and educators -- and have decided to handle desegregation in a way that the price black communities must pay is so high that blacks themselves often wonder if it's worth it.

Except for Little Rock, no southern city can compare with Boston in terms of the resistance and difficulties occurring there. Other southern school systems, however unwillingly, drew up desegregation plans and implemented them peacefully and with a minimum of disruption and disorder, after seeing the disastrous events of Little Rock.

Boston can be categorized as the Little Rock of the North.

For it seems to me that the outcome there may well set a pattern for the course of desegregation across the North. And I think it is terribly important for the voice of reason to prevail over shrill outcries against constitutional law.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is totally unfair, in my opinion, for the Nation to apply a double standard regarding northern and southern public school desegregation, to fail to move in the North with as much vigor and commitment as was displayed in the South. When the southern schools were to desegregate, it was the law of the land, a legal and appropriate interpretation of the Constitution. No matter how it felt, the South had to desegregate not only its schools, but all other areas as well.

While I realize that it was easier to move against southern school desegregation -- because segregation was often a matter of State law -- I think it's plainly hypocritical if the North is in any way exempted from the same requirements imposed on the South. Indeed, if northern school districts are found violating the Constitution or a Federal desegregation order through imbalance of the school system along racial lines, they must be made to correct the discrepancy immediately.

What are some of the things the North should do to get on with school desegregation?

Whether facing desegregation because of a Federal court ruling or action from some other enforcing agency, a community tends to polarize quickly. One basic thing that should be done is to change the climate from one of hostility and potential conflict to one with at least a minimal level of tolerance. We at CRS have found that the best method for achieving this is to rally the community at large around the common denominator of avoiding violence.

We believe it is important to develop constructive alternatives before tension builds to a high level and the community further polarizes.

Essential to this effort is the announcement by community groups, businessmen, chambers of commerce, and other leaders, and news media editorials, that whatever the disagreements regarding the merits of the desegregation plan, everyone must avoid anything that could compound the problem and further divide the community.

Another step the North could take, which proved successful in some southern communities, is to create a community-wide task force composed of representatives of all groups and institutions involved in the desegregation process. This would range from the school system to parental groups, students, local government, police, private organizations, human relations commissions, and the like.

The task force could add an important ingredient for coming to grips with problems and for developing solutions to these problems. It could stimulate and coordinate community or neighborhood workshops preparatory to desegregation involving persons in a particular area jointly working on the problems.

The major purpose of the task force would be two-fold:

1. Serving as a coordinating body to deal with contingencies and coordination, and
2. Serving as a focus for widespread community involvement.

Another thing we believe is that a strong schoolwide human relations program which addresses itself to in-service training of staff for the total school system and for each individual school may prove to be very effective. Management teams can be selected and trained at each school to be alert to potential problems and work out solutions on an ongoing basis.

A problem which often arises, especially when school districts are merged, is the need for some way to deal fairly with promotions and demotions of teachers and administrators.

We recommend that an affirmative action plan to deal with this problem be developed cooperatively by school board members, administrators, and teachers.

These are but a few of the things we believe northern school systems must do to avoid major problems.

Ladies and gentlemen, public school desegregation is not the end of the world. The process is extremely painful only when local officials and administrators lack the courage and determination to move forthwith with desegregation planning. Pain is diminished where there is cooperative effort involving all community segments in anticipating problems in advance and designing plans to eliminate them.

Like it or not, come September many northern school systems are going to be desegregated. It would therefore behoove them to get on with the job which lies ahead.

Thank you very much.